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ECONOMIC MAN—A DEFINITION

By ALBERT ERNEST JENKS

When an Ojibwa dies in northern Minnesota, even today, his clothing, a few pairs of moccasins, a blanket, a pipe and a tobacco pouch, a *midé* skin (his sacred medicine-bag), and his gun, with, perhaps, a dog or two, are buried with him; they are virtually all the property he possesses. We are now witnessing an American citizen give away his chattels, almost daily, in blocks of ten thousand, one hundred thousand, a million, and even ten million dollars, vainly striving to distribute his possessions before he dies. Great as are the gaps between the primitive American and the modern American in their beliefs and practises of the esthetic and mechanical arts, of socialization, of language, and of wisdom, the difference between the two is nowhere more marked than it is in the realm of material possessions.

This wonderful change from the primitive man with his fire, shelter, clothing, weapons, and tools—all of which he alone could move from twenty-five to one hundred miles in a single day—to the man in our own city with property-interests of millions scattered through a dozen states, is due to the rise, development, and predominance of what may be called the economic sense.

Economic sense expresses itself in a unique mental attitude toward consumable goods. It is the invariable possession of the economic man — it is the mark of the economic man.

The fundamental idea in the mortuary sacrifices of the Ojibwa is the destruction of property. To avoid discontent, dissention, and quarrels over the disposition of the property of the deceased, that property is destroyed; no weight is given to the fact of the continued productiveness of property. Mr Carnegie, while likewise seeking to avoid possible dissatisfaction and complications at the disposition of his property at death, has foremost in mind the continued productiveness of that property.

The morning mists of time hang heavy around the beginnings of most things human, but it is believed possible so to define economic man that he will be separable from natural man preceding him. Let economic man be defined as one who, for future gain, produces or traffics in consumable goods; and let natural man be defined as one who produces to satisfy only immediate wants. A word explaining the term *future gain*, as here used, may not be out of place: It means a gain of more than is necessary to continue life at the same level. Production or traffic for the purpose of future gain is a purposeful effort to raise the standard of life. Early in human society material possessions became the sesame which opened the way to life on a higher level, and production and traffic for the purpose of future gain is a determinate effort put forth to acquire such possessions.

The line thus drawn between natural man and economic man also forever separates economic man from the animals when he is considered with them in relation to consumption, and this line is the first that can be drawn separating them when they are so considered. Production or traffic for future gain is the first distinctively human attitude toward consumable goods.

In the last analysis, production — the fundamental and eternal process of economics — is the volitional stretching forth of a member or organ of one's body, and the taking or possessing

of the desired object. Thus, the higher animals are truly producers.

As a step higher, we notice that many animals show a strong natural instinct akin to that of possessory right. Possessory right means two things: First, the ability to recognize an object as one's own, and, second, the power to defend the ownership. These characteristics are exactly those a dog shows regarding his meal of bone, that cattle show in fighting for their accustomed stalls, and that birds exhibit in defending their nests, and even their nesting-places, with their lives. Darwin says that a monkey in the London Zoölogical Gardens used a stone to crack nuts with, since his teeth were weak; and when he had finished each meal, he carefully laid the stone under the straw of his enclosure and kept all other monkeys from appropriating it.¹

In the next higher stage or phase of economic activity, that of gathering and saving during a period of plenty against a time of need, many of the higher and even lower animals rival, nay, frequently outstrip, natural man. Among these may be recalled squirrels, beavers, birds, ants, bees, and some carnivora.

The animals produce and protect their shelters and housings; they accumulate, store, and defend relatively large supplies of food for consumption by themselves or their progeny during periods of scarcity or weakness. Man shares with the animals in these phases of positive, though incipient, economic expression; but he alone has left these stages and developed a higher form. He produces, has proprietary right in his productions, and accumulates goods in store, but he alone produces with a purposeful effort for future gain, and he alone traffics or exchanges his possessions with another by freewill contract. When this stage is reached, economic sense is safely developing, and man is on the pathway to material success.

In defining economic man as one who produces or traffics for

¹ Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*; 2d ed., revised and augmented with illustrations, N. Y., 1898, p. 83.

future gain, we place him at the beginning of modern culture. Prof. Albion W. Small has said that modern culture consists of health, wealth, sociability, knowledge, beauty, and righteousness. Of course, in modern culture these six essentials come not in the greatest quantity to the greatest number, but they come in the greatest quantity possible to all. During the period of time when a family produced each season from its immediate environment only its own stock of goods consumed, when nearly every day was spent in procuring adequate food, clothing, shelter, and protection from warring men, it was manifestly impossible for anything marking the beginning of modern culture to exist. As soon, however, as man produced and stored away the necessities of even simple life, — stored them, not for consumption during a time of scarcity, but for consumption during a period of plenty, or for traffic, — then it was that the genius of progress flickered like a feeble flame, flickered and grew bright in the human brain.

Leisure, with a healthy incentive to activity, is absolutely essential to modern progress. Leisure did not come to man, and could not come, until necessities were supplied for a certain period of the future; the healthy incentive for constant activity did not appear until the time of production or traffic for future gain — such gain was, in fact, the first incentive to constant activity, and still is the chief one. Thus, production for future gain gave leisure; and accumulating for future gain was an ever-increasing mainspring to keep man producing. Leisure to produce and incentive to produce are the two great ever interacting and reacting essentials to production.

With these essentials given, freedom from the constant menace of starvation found man ripe for better health; he was already beginning to acquire wealth; the time was auspicious for friendly socialization; such intercourse fertilized the seeds of human knowledge; and all of these gave men better and constantly changing standards of beauty, right, and justice.

There are two socio-economic institutions found among primi-

tive people, each of which, then, may originate, develop, and advance economic man: These are production and traffic. Production is not only the most important of these institutions, but it is the one absolutely indispensable to economic manhood.

Agriculture and zoöculture, as commonly understood, are the two aboriginal productive enterprises which are at once seen to come within the definition of activities carried on for the purpose of future gain. When a quantity of maize or other seed, of roots or tubers, is laid aside at harvest time, is conserved, and planted at a future seeding, the dominating purpose is that of future gain. It is a purpose steadfast enough to evolve an agricultural people from a more lowly tribe. It must be a steadfast purpose in order, in the teeth of hunger, to save the yearly supply of seed. When hunger once forced a primitive agricultural or zoöcultural community to consume its last domesticated seed or animal, merciless blight wasted away the people until their numbers were so small that they could again find sustenance from the natural and spontaneous products of their country.

In agriculture and zoöculture Nature aids man as she does in no other productive enterprise, since reproduction and growth mean, in essence, nothing but future gain. Whether the gain is twofold or two-hundredfold, animals or plants reserved from immediate consumption for the purpose of increase are sure indexes of economic man. But when these cultivated products are kept in store by man in greater quantity than is necessary to sustain life during time of natural scarcity, man's economic sense is well established, since he lacks only needy consumers who will buy, to make him not only producer but trafficker and money-earner.

Traffic, in the form of barter, is the forerunner of commerce. Traffic, whether barter or commerce, is the result of a psychic condition—a desire to raise one's standard of life by gaining the article that passes in trade. Thus traffic is egocentric, first and last; but its law of development is, first, centripetal, and, later, centrifugal. Commercially considered, man first traded,

primarily, to get for himself the article another possessed, and he gradually came to trade with the desire to supply what the other party wanted. This latter condition developed with great rapidity when a medium of exchange, more or less a standard of value, came to play its part in the transaction of traffic over an area occupied by people of different culture-grades, or by people whose products were dissimilar. Today the dominant force of the superior nation in commerce is the desire to supply the wants of other people; and, in the common mind, that nation is commercially the most successful whose balance of trade shows the largest value of exports in comparison with the value of its imports.